



SPRING CLEANSING

WE'VE ALL HEARD ABOUT THE BENEFICIAL EFFECTS OF DETOXING OUR BODIES, BUT COULD IT WORK FOR OUR LIVING SPACES, TOO? AFTER AN ONSLAUGHT OF REPAIRS, SARAH BERNARD LETS A FENG SHUI CONSULTANT TAKE A CRACK AT HER HOME

It was the time I found our kitchen tiles smashed and scattered across the floor like seashells that did it. Or maybe it was when repair work on our building's 1929 facade, coupled with drafty casement windows, left every surface of our apartment covered in toxic dust as thick as volcanic ash. My husband and I had just bought this apartment, the first we'd ever owned. It was not a fixer-upper, and the couple we bought it from seemed genuinely sad to leave it. After a paint job, we unpacked our boxes and vowed to begin living like grown-ups, with a real couch and an actual dishwasher. But things started to happen: little things, freak things. The first weekend, the closet in our bedroom inexplicably sealed itself shut—on Monday, a baffled handyman resorted to forcing the door off its hinges. Leaks from the terrace above caused much of our new paint job to bubble and peel. Roaches the size of mice camped out in our bathtub while a jarring noise, something between a moan and a roar, emanated from the bathroom pipes every hour.

When a problem arose, I'd dutifully make arrangements to fix it. This is what homeowners do. But the aggravation was so frequent, even our plants decided they'd seen enough and simultaneously wilted and died. Our sad tales had become a cocktail-party joke to everyone who knew us. We managed to laugh along until one day a metal scaffold appeared—blocking the light and views that had sold us on the apartment in the first place—which, we were told, would remain in place for a year while the facade was

finished. Nothing was funny anymore. Neither one of us wanted to be the first one home, the one who would have to deal with whatever calamity was awaiting. When the dishwasher leaked a river of suds across the kitchen and into the living room, I simply sat on the floor and cried. When an elderly neighbor took to passing out and urinating in the hallway, we knew the time had come to get out—except how could we? Who in the world would take this apartment off our hands?

Either the sellers had unloaded the biggest lemon in the building, or, while we were blithely signing check after check at the closing, a cloud of destructive juju had invaded. I opted for the second scenario and decided the apartment needed help. I'd heard about feng shui consultant Judith Wendell and her company Sacred Currents from several sources. One sympathetic friend had offered to spring for a "clearing" after the first few mishaps, but it sounded spooky, like an exorcism, and I declined. Now I was willing to try anything. In truth, I reasoned, there are countless bizarre ways we've come to fetishize detoxing our own bodies: electric facials, juice fasts, colonics. Perhaps a spatial detox would appease the apartment gods.

On the phone, Wendell—who holds a degree from the BTB Feng Shui Masters Training Program and spent 16 years studying at the School of Practical Philosophy in New York City—sounded reassuringly levelheaded as she outlined

the clearing process. Her menu of services, which can run \$1,500 per day, includes rearranging furniture and adding decorative objects to balance the elements—water, wood, fire, earth, and metal—according to feng shui principles. This helps flush out the negative energy, or chi, to which believers ascribe everything from career setbacks to weight gain. Wendell explained: “If you have clutter in an area that’s a problem for you”—each space contains nine sectors representing a different aspect of self, including relationships, new beginnings, career, health, and so on—“you have to clean it up to allow for something new to happen.”

One real-estate agent hired her when a prime apartment languished on the market despite her savviest selling techniques. “Gorgeous building, incredible views. Tons of Peter Max all over,” Wendell said. “We did a clearing and it went into contract the next week for \$2.7 million.”

Business owners seeking a financial boost are among Wendell’s most devoted clients: Last year when Yann Varin, a hairdresser on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, was opening his second salon in a former shoe store with a leaky ceiling, he hired Wendell to “reverse the energy.” After a consultation, during which she recommended placing a red flag by the front door for visibility and painting the staircase a “water color” to activate wealth, Varin is now leak-free with a monthlong waiting list. Dan Gwirtzman’s Locust Valley, New York, Bikram

yoga studio has apparently seen business improve 30 percent since Wendell repositioned his desk to face the door and hung crystals with red string to refract and spread energy.

Wendell also gets lots of calls from love-seeking singles asking her to remove romantic blockages from their bedrooms. (If a single woman has photographs of lonely-looking images—desert scenes or other single friends—it can have a negative impact, Wendell notes.) After a breakup, magazine publisher Deborah Malone remembers Wendell asking, “Do you realize that someone walked out of your life, and in the most passionate area of your home—your bedroom—you have a hat rack?” Since Malone moved the rack to a guest room and implemented Wendell’s other changes, she’s found a new love. Now she admits to consulting with Wendell on other life decisions, from moving apartments to buying a dining room table.

Proof of feng shui’s effectiveness is almost entirely anecdotal—Eastern practitioners point to thousands of years of Chinese tradition and argue that chi can’t be quantified—but Wendell notes that the practice has become so accepted that executives at Disney and Merrill Lynch, even the unflappable Donald Trump, apply feng shui principles to their properties. Some Western scientists have tried to subject chi to scientific protocols—in one study, mice who’d been injected with lymphoma cells and treated by a chi gong healer (another group received a sham treatment) had

slightly less tumor growth than the control group—but most research is inconclusive. “It makes sense that your environment can physically affect your body,” says Barry Gordon, a physicist and instructor at BTB, explaining that cell membranes are affected by electromagnetic activity, “but it’s very difficult to measure.”

I decided to sign up for the works. Wendell said she’d need a floor plan and our birth dates to calculate our feng shui numerology, which, she added, “helps me understand the client.” She left me with a shopping list: 15 red envelopes, three cups of uncooked rice, nine candles, fresh flowers, a large orange, plus a bottle of 151 proof Bacardi rum. I hung up feeling apprehensive. Then our bathroom ceiling filled with water.

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When Wendell arrived a few days later, she wasn’t the Wiccan priestess I’d imagined—she’s slim and stylish with close-cropped brown hair. But when I opened my front door, she looked stricken. Locating our apartment at the end of a twisty hallway without the aid of directionals feels a bit like navigating a rabbit hole. It makes it hard for the chi to find us, she explained, adding, “And what’s that *smell*?”

Wendell got right to work. She’d superimposed the Bagua, the feng shui “map,” over our floor plan and divided the space into nine sectors with the crisp pencil lines of an architect. Our bath-

room is smack in the center of the health sector, which she deemed “draining.” We had a “missing” area in the creativity sector, where our apartment narrows, in need of bolstering. The beams in our ceilings, which we found charming, apparently lead to headaches, especially if they run directly above your bed. “It’s like water running over a rock,” she said disapprovingly. “At first nothing happens, but after 10 years it makes a ridge.” She eyed the bedrooms’ two doors and gasped: “A big door facing a little door,” she said, shaking her head. “One eats the other.”

As Wendell walked from room to room, I grew more depressed. This was not going to be as simple as moving a couch or a painting. I feared that the apartment had fundamental defects that we could do nothing about. Not so, she explained; there are “adjustments” to counter each issue.

Rocks the size of apples in all four corners and a salt cure (a soup container filled with salt, water, six pennies, and a silver coin) would stabilize the energy loss in the bathroom, plus we needed nine stalks of bamboo, a fast-growing plant that “reaches upward and counters the downward force of the drain.” Hanging a large mirror in the missing creativity sector would amplify and strengthen the space. Our stove, which represents health and wealth, is unfortunately positioned so that the chef has his or her back to the front door. In feng shui, Wendell said, this means our health and wealth can be stolen—“or you can be startled when someone you

can't see arrives and puts that energy into the food." She suggested hanging wind chimes over the front door with red string. I drew the line at wind chimes; we compromised on a row of leafy plants that I set up along the kitchen island.

Apart from compensating for deficiencies, Wendell offered remedies for magnifying the positive aspects of each sector. "You've got a nine plus an eight in here, which is great," she said, standing in the living room and performing a feng shui calculus using the building's construction date and the compass points of the front door. "I'd add a fountain or some virtual water—a picture of a beach could work—to activate wealth."

Then Wendell pulled out her dowsing rod, a copper L-shaped instrument that spins in the presence of disturbed energy, and walked slowly and deliberately into each room. I followed, feeling like we'd officially gone down the wacko hatch. It spun furiously in spots. When I looked suspicious, she let me try it. Environments act like energy sponges, she explained, as the rod I was holding whipped around so quickly I had to keep it at arm's length so it wouldn't smack my face. They soak up the vibrations that every object and color give off, even the emotions of their inhabitants.

Then, using a pendulous quartz crystal threaded through a silver chain, she began a Q&A session with...the universe (or, as Wendell paraphrased, our "collective unconscious"). After asking about previous tenants and the geopathic structure of the earth underneath the building, she got her answers in the form of a counterclockwise swing for no and the opposite for yes. Much of the negative chi came from a husband and abused wife who lived here long ago, she explained. "Can we clear it?" she asked the room—or was it the angry couple? The crystal swung clockwise. For the first time I was grateful for the scaffolding: no worries about weirding out my neighbors.

"Now, can I prove any of this? No," she said, reading my frozen smile. "But the important thing is to clear the disturbance with the greatest respect, not knowing what it's about." That or being desperate enough to try anything short of throwing the keys down the mail chute, I thought.

We got to work on the big finale: assembling the altar for the clearing ceremony. Wendell covered our dining table with a red and orange tapestry and told me to fill nine bowls with water, then set a floating candle and some of the flower petals in each. Next to them we arranged objects that I chose for their importance to me: family photos, my mother's garnet ring, a tango-dancing trophy that my grandparents won in the Catskills—I even snuck in our mortgage statement. While Wendell toured the place burning resin and ringing a bell to "break up the stuck energy," my job was to place a bowl in all nine sectors and think about my "intentions" for

each. As I set a bowl in the New Beginnings area (aka my husband's dresser), I was thinking about how our stress and anger contributed to the unrest of the space and how we needed to adjust our own attitudes to allow for a positive outcome. By the time I made my way to the Benefactor's sector by the front door, I realized I was eagerly "empowering my bowl" with a Sanskrit chant without a twinge of shame or embarrassment.

We finished by mixing the rice with the alcohol and red cinnabar powder as an offering of thanks to the spirits, whoever they may be. "Spirits love alcohol," she explained, as I poured one drop of Bacardi into the mixture for each year of

my life, then stirred with my fingers. "Maybe it's spirit to spirit or something," she mused. I hoped they understood this was last call.

Suddenly, and maybe for the first time, our apartment—with the flickering candle flames and petals—looked incredibly beautiful. That night, my last task was to cut nine circles out of orange peel and take a bath with them—an acidic yang cure for my yinlike foggy depletion. I eased my way into the tub that I'd never spent more than a few quick minutes in and soaked. I tried to feel if anything had changed. All I can say is, I saw no roaches, and for the first time

since we'd moved in, there was no noise from the pipes.

In Chinatown, I sought out the most vibrant-looking bamboo I could find and arranged the stalks in clusters of nine, the most sacred number in feng shui. I carefully picked up rocks from the beach, tucked them into the bathroom corners, and set about fashioning my salt cure. It would take a few months for the scaffolding to come down and for the elderly neighbor to move out, but slowly, we realized, there were fewer and fewer unnatural disasters. Soon it had been weeks since I'd spoken to the super to schedule a repair. It was as if the apartment and I had called a truce.

The other day I was thinking about something one of Wendell's clients told me after her visit. Ann Marie Borghese, who, with her husband, operates Castello di Borghese, the oldest vineyard on the North Fork of Long Island, felt so discomfited by a "heaviness" in their 200-year-old farm house that every time she came home she "felt like running away." Wendell spent a weekend ordering surgical strikes such as salt cures, hanging crystals, and positioning a jade plant in front of her back door, which stands across from the front door. (In feng shui, facing doors mean energy enters the space and then rushes out.) Borghese, who felt the changes "made the atmosphere lighter and brighter," said she didn't know if the clearing had actually worked or if the entire enterprise was just an exercise to give them a sense of control over the house. "I don't know and can't know," she said, "but it made me happy." And what, in the end, is really the difference? □

Cleaning supplies: Rice, candles, photos, and spirits for the "spirits"

